

TWO CONTRA-VELENO CUPS MADE FROM TERRA SIGILLATA MELITENSIS

G. ZAMMIT-MAEMPEL

M.D., F.G.S.

Abstract

This paper is part of a Monograph on *Terra melitensis* or rock excavated from St. Paul's Grotto where the Apostle of the Gentiles is said to have spent his three months enforced stay on the Island following his shipwreck in A.D.60.

The Cave is traditionally thought to possess the property of rock regeneration and its limestone was said to be of great medicinal value in many illnesses and to possess the miraculous property of averting or neutralising the effects of poison. Cups made from this powdered limestone were consequently often referred to as *Contra-Veleno Cups*. Only two such specimens have been traced so far and these are both described and figured in this paper.

One of the cups, now forming part of the Sloane Collection in the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum, London, has fossil palatal teeth and crinoid ossicles embedded in its inside base. The second specimen, which is being described and figured for the first time, belonged to the "*Giuseppe Monti 1733 Collection*", and is now preserved at the Museo Cappellini, Istituto di Geologia e Paleontologia dell'Università di Bologna, Italy.

There is a cave at Rabat, Malta, that is generally regarded as having been the abode of the Apostle St. Paul during his three-month stay on the Island following his shipwreck in A.D.60. Tradition has it that the hard, white limestone of this cave has, through the intercession of the Saint, acquired the wonderful attribute of rock-regeneration and the power of protecting people from the harmful effects of poisons. Chippings or powdered limestone from this site were consequently referred to as

Gratia S. Pauli, "St. Paul's earth", or *Terra melitensis*, which was thought to have acquired its miraculous properties through its contact with the Saint who converted our forefathers to Christianity and rendered Maltese snakes harmless.

Throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century there was such a great demand for *Terra melitensis*, from all parts of Europe, that its distribution was apparently controlled either by the Grand Master of the Order (who was the suzerain of Malta), or by the Church authorities, or, what is most probable, by both. The responsible authorities stamped Maltese earth from the Grotto with official seals most of which bore a religious theme that was somehow related to the Order. They bore in addition, peripheral inscriptions or legends similar to the ones used by the Order on its coins.

Notwithstanding that there is no official record to prove it, such a practice of associating a religious theme on one side of a medal with an emblem of the Order (eight-pointed cross, bust of Grandmaster) on its obverse, strongly suggests that the Order had a considerable influence on the authentication procedure. This becomes all the more convincing once it is known that by 1610 the Grand Master of the Order had taken over the administration of St. Paul's Crypt, source of *Terra melitensis*, (Dal Pozzo, 1703-15, p.547).

In a note on the preparation of *Terra sigillata* Lemery (1762, p.163) records that rock chippings were finely powdered in a mortar and subsequently "placed in a marble or earthenware receptacle and soaked in plantain water. The suspension was then stirred with a stick or pestle and decanted. Coarse impurities were removed and the rest was filtered through a greased paper inserted in a funnel". The bolus thus

VIRTU DELLA PIETRA

DI S. PAOLO,

*Delle Lingue, & Occhi di Serpe pretiosi, quali si trouano
nell'Isola di Malta.*

Questa Terra, chiamata Pietra di S. PAOLO, si troua nella nobilissima Isola di MALTA, nella Grotta istessa di S. Paolo, lontana da Città noua otto miglia: è di colore bianchissimo: e di essa se ne formano Imagini, medaglie, tazze, vasetti, & altre cose.

Le lingue di colore cinerico, & Occhi di serpi di pietra di colore arangiato, si trouano per tutta l'Isola, così formate, come si vedono dall'istessa natura, che rappresenta il miracolo grandissimo fatto dal glorioso Apostolo S. Paolo quando predicò tre mesi nell'Isola detta, e la conuertì alla fede di Christo: e spogliò di veleno tutte le serpi, che vi erano, rendendole mansuete, & inabili ad offendere, come se fossero di pietra, priuilegiando insieme e le pietre, e la terra istessa di molte grazie.

Le virtù della pietra, e dell'occhi, e lingue sudette, son marauigliose, poiche vagliono contro ogni sorte di veleno, e morso di animali velenosi, non solo per preseruari da quelli, acciò non offendono, ma ancora sono rimedio efficace, dopò che alcuno hauesse preso veleno, ò fosse stato morso, ò punto d'animale velenoso.

Giuuano ancora in molte altre infermità, come di continue febbre vedono esperienze nell'Isola di Malta, & altroue, secondo la particolar deuotione di chi le vsa, con raccomandarsi deuotamente al Signore Iddio, & al detto santissimo Apost. S. Paolo, à intercessione del quale furono da Sua Diuina Maestà di tante grazie dotate.

Il modo di adoperarle, è, che si sogliono portare in detti anelli, ne i quali siano posti per gemme, li detti occhi in modo, che tocchino la carne.

O si possano detti Linguetti al collo, ò al braccio.

O vero si beue acqua, ò vino, ò liquore nel quale sia distemperata vn poco di detta pietra bianca.

O visia stata infusa per poco tempo vno di detti occhi, ò lingue.

O detta acqua, ò vino sia stata in detti vasi fatti di detta pietra.

E sopra tutto si auuertisca, che la pietra, & altre cose sudette siano vere, e reali, e non falsificate: ma portate da fidata persona della detta Isola di Malta con le debite sedi.

IN MESSINA, Per Giacomo Mattei. Con licenza de' Superiori.

Fig. 1. An undated and anonymous manifesto published in Messina, probably during the 17th century, recalling the wonderful virtues, possessed by such precious objects as "St. Paul's Stone/earth", "St. Paul's tongues" and "Serpents' eyes" occurring in the Island of Malta.

Various editions and translation of this handbill have appeared; one of them dated as late as 1768, was published in Rome by Arcangelo Casaletti.

By courtesy: Bibliothèque Nationale et
Universitaire, Strasbourg. Cote
R.5, Fol. 4.

Translation

"The virtues of St. Paul's Stone,
of the Tongues and precious Serpents' eyes
which are to be found in the Island of Malta.

"This Earth, known as St. Paul's Stone, is to be found in the noble Island of Malta, in St. Paul's Grotto itself, (which) is eight miles distant from the new city. It is of a very white colour and from it are made statues, medals, cups and vases and other things.

Ash-coloured tongues and serpents' eyes made of an orange-coloured stone, can be found throughout the whole Island. These were, as one sees, formed by nature itself. This being a very great miracle by the Apostle St. Paul, when for three months he preached on the Island and converted (the inhabitants) to the Faith of Christ; deprived all snakes of their poison, rendering them timid and harmless as if they had been (made) of stone, and finally privileged the local stones as well as the earth itself with many attributes.

The virtues of the Stone and of the above-mentioned eyes and tongues are wonderful, for they are useful against all sort of poison and against the bites of poisonous animals; They not only protect one against these, but (what is more) they are actually an efficacious remedy as an antidote after one has ingested poison or has been bitten by a poisonous animal.

They are also useful in many other illnesses, as one evidences continuously in the Island of Malta and elsewhere (their use varying) according to the particular devotion of the user who devoutly prays Our Lord and the Great Apostle Saint Paul, by whose intercession they were enriched with so many attributes by His Divine Majesty.

The best way of using them (= Serpents' eyes, St. Paul's tongues, and St. Paul's earth or Malta Earth), is to wear a ring having for gemstone a serpent's eye that has been mounted in such a way as to touch the skin; or else to suspend the tongues from a bracelet or necklace; or else to drink wine, water or spirits in which some white Malta limestone powder has been dissolved; or else to drink liquids in which serpents' eyes or tongues have been boiled for some time to produce an infusion; or else to drink water or wine that has been poured into jugs made of the Malta stone. Above all, (the author warns his readers), one must be absolutely sure that the stone, tongue or eyes used are not fakes, but genuine Maltese specimens brought from the Island by a trusted person possessing the necessary credentials.

In Messina, by Giacomo Mattei. With permission of the Superiors."

formed was then cut into smaller fragments, shaped as required, stamped as an indication of their authenticity and "allowed to dry in the sun". Under no circumstances was *Terra sigillata* to be baked in an oven. Such a drying process as one listed above ensured the safe storage of the sealed earth as it guaranteed against subsequent mould formation, and was considered to be a very important stage in its preparation.

Anonymous manifestos or handbills (Fig 1) written in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries extolling "The Virtues of St. Paul's Earth" record that from this "very white" powder were formed "images, medals, cups, vases and other objects". The present paper, however, will be limited to the description of the only two *Terra sigillata melitensis* cups known to be still in existence. On account of their origin these cups, which are now generally known as "Contra-Veleno Cups", were attributed with many therapeutic properties besides that of protecting their user from being poisoned. As early as 1554, Matthiolus (p. 694) had already challenged the pharmacological efficacy of these cups, but they were still being used more than a century after his warning. Indeed, the anonymous seventeenth century leaflet or handbill (fig 1), proclaims that drinking water or wine from cups made of limestone excavated from St. Paul's Grotto in Rabat, Malta, was considered to be the best way of using *Terra melitensis*.

No documentary evidence as to who made such cups and whether they were sold or given away free of charge could be traced. It is quite certain, however, that a number of these were exported, and it has been recorded that the French Missionary Jesuits in Greece had a number of such cups in their possession during "a severe epidemic" in the seventeenth century. Their function seems to have been not only "protective" (from poisoning), but also "curative" and they were often used in severe illnesses when other medicaments had failed. It is narrated (Mizzi, 1937) that when in 1641 an epidemic was raging in Paros, Greece, the French Jesuits (who at

the time had just started their mission on that island), suggested that those people, on whom medical drugs had failed to act, should as a last resort, drink from vases or cups made from *Terra melitensis*. It is said that this remedy worked and that "many of the patients recovered". There is no mention, however, of what the epidemic actually was or what percentage of patients drinking from the cup (as compared to those not drinking from it) survived to tell the story.

Drinking water or wine from *Terra melitensis* cups was considered to have a cardiotonic or heart stimulating effect, for Geoffroy (1772, p.45) asserts in his *De Materia Medica* that "ex ea (= *Terra melitensis*) parantur vasa quibus si vinum vel aqua infundatur, liquor virtute cardiaca donari vulgo creditur".

It is interesting to note here that *Contra-Veleno* Cups made from *Terra sigillata Lemniae* were also used for the same purpose as those made from *Terra melitensis*, and that until very recent times, the Turks believed "that a vase of this earth delays the effect of any poison drunk from it, a belief which the ancients attached to the earth from Cape Kolias in Attica" (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1962, vol. 13, p. 905).

In an attempt to localise and examine *Terra sigillata melitensis* material dispersed throughout the world, the present writer has personally examined or corresponded with various European Museums and private collectors. Only two such cups have been encountered and these were both personally examined and are being described and figured in this paper. The cups were localised in London (U.K.) and Bologna (Italy) respectively. The Bologna specimen was spotted accidentally amongst a number of fossils exhibited at the Museo Capellini at the Institute of Geology and Palaeontology of the University of Bologna, when this was host to the participants of the IV International Congress on the Mediterranean Neogene in 1967. No *Contra-Veleno* Cups were encountered in any of the Maltese collections (National Museums, Church Museums, private collections). To explain

this apparent anomaly, it is herein suggested that most of the Cups were exported; indeed, as they were considered to have had the same attributes as powdered Maltese earth placed in a drink, they would not have been of much use on the Island, where an unlimited supply of the "stone" itself was always available. On the other hand, it would have been considered more economical for foreigners to take one cup for repeated use, instead of having to carry a large supply of the "stone" for powdering in each drink.

The genuine Maltese *Contra-Veleno* Cups bore special seals to indicate that they were made out of earth from St. Paul's Grotto. On account of the seal they bore, they were said to have been made of *Terra sigillata melitensis*, a name applied also to trocisci, medals, and possibly "other objects" bearing the seal of genuineness. The figures of scorpions, spiders, snakes, vipers and lizards appearing on some of the impressions reveal not only the purpose for which they objects bearing them were originally intended, but also their supposed effectiveness against poisoned bites by such animals.

**The Terra Sigillata Melitensis
Poison Cup
at the British Museum, London.**

In a paper read at the 17th International Congress on the History of Medicine (1913), Thompson referred to *Terra sigillata* as a "famous medicament of ancient times" and in a subsequent publication (1932) in the *British Medical Journal* he described the base of a 42mm diameter cup made from such earth derived from the Island of Malta. The item which he described is now preserved in the Medieval Department of the British Museum, in London as Sloane Collection No. 541 (Fig 2), and was examined by the present writer in 1968. It consists of the base and broken sides of a *Contra-Veleno* Cup made of *Terra sigillata melitensis*. Its slightly concave internal surface bears the seal of authenticity, whilst its convex external surface is decorated with bass reliefs of Maltese crosses, large snakes and

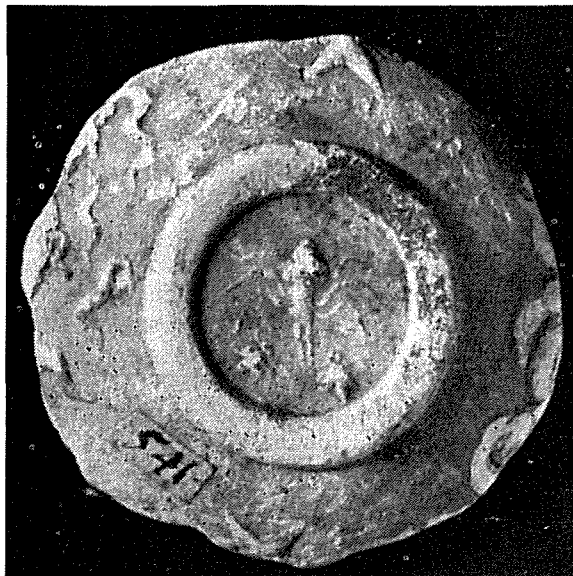
small vipers. The underside of its base reveals three unidentifiable objects also in relief. The broken cup is 6.7mm thick and has a maximum diameter of 74mm.

External decoration: (Fig 2A).

On opposite sides of its outer surface the cup once bore two Maltese crosses in relief, both of which are now defective in their upper quadrants as the cup lacks rim and upper sides. Reliefs of serpents fill the space between the crosses in the form of large thick snakes on one side and a number of smaller snakes or vipers and what seems to be part of a larger, thick snake on the other. The cup has no ears. It rests on a 6mm thick circular, flattened rim having an external diameter of 42mm, and enclosing in its depression a relief carving of three queer objects. The two smaller side figures may represent wasps, while the central object is more difficult to identify with its large, somewhat triangular, head, oval body and bifid end. Three wavy lines project perpendicularly from either side of the oval body. It has been suggested that the enigmatic object might represent a cuttlefish or a grasshopper (pers. comm. M.N. Taylor, Keeper, Department of British and Medieval Antiquities, Brit., Mus., London, letter 21 Dec., 1965), but it looks more like a stylised bird with outstretched wings and legs. Whichever, if any, is the correct identification, the present writer fails to see the association between any of the suggested animal figures and a *Contra-Veleno* Cup.

For some reason (probably the great uncertainty in the identification of these enigmatic figures), Thompson (1932) completely ignored the decorative figures on the external surface of the Cup. He also disregarded the fossil crinoid ossicles embedded on the inside of the cup, limiting his description to the impressed seal and some of the objects implanted in it. The objects which Thompson called "small polished stones of a pale orange colour" are the palatal teeth of fossil fish allied to *Sargus*, and which were known to the ancients as "Serpents' eyes".

Medieval Poison Cup made from Terra sigillata of Malta in the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities, British Museum, London. Sloane Collection No. 541). Max. diam. 74mm. By courtesy: The Trustees of the British Museum, London.



2a. External view showing bass relief figures of snakes, vipers and Maltese crosses (on sides), and unidentified objects in circular rimmed base).



2b. Internal view showing a seal of genuine Terra melitensis: St. Paul holding a staff around which is entwined a serpent. Peripheral legend reads "Pietra D. S. Paolo. Contra-Veleno". Embedded in the impressed material are three "serpent's eyes" or fossil palatal teeth of fish Chrysophrys (left upper quadrant), and two fossil crinoid stem ossicles, Isocrinus sp. (right upper quadrant).

Internal decoration (Fig 2B).

The impression of the seal on the inside of the cup is one of those used to authenticate *Terra melitensis*. It represents the bust of St. Paul, who is figured as a haloed, bearded man holding in his right hand a staff on to which a serpent is entwined. This is the "*effigies S. Pauli tenentis viperam gladio circumvolutam*" described by Konig (1703) as the characteristic seal for *Terra melitensis*. The saint's left index finger points to the reptile, which probably represents, not the viper that fastened upon his hand when collecting brushwood, but rather the *Caduceus* or emblem of Aesculapius. This

could have been in allusion to the medical effects that these sealed objects were supposed to have on the health of the individual whom they protected from the effects of poison. The seal bears the following words on its periphery: *PIETRA D.S. PAOLO, CONTRA-VELENO.*"

In order to have its efficacy against a poisoned drink increased, the British Museum *Contra-Veleno Cup* was studded on its inside with seven Maltese fossils, of which only five are preserved. They were embedded in the material of the cup after the seal had been impressed, but before the cup had hardened. The smoothly-rounded, yellowish-brown, hemispherical objects embedded over the Saint's head

and to his right side, are what the ancients referred to as "serpents' eyes". H.A. Toombs formerly of the Department of Palaeontology of the British Museum (Natural History), confirmed them to be respectively two marginal palatal teeth and a central palatal tooth of the fossil fish *Chrysophrys* (= *Pagrus* or *Sargus*). Such teeth are very common in Malta's Miocene sedimentary rocks, particularly in the Greensand formation.

Embedded on the Saint's left side are two other objects identified as fossil crinoid stem ossicles. The upper one is rounded, while the lower one is of a pentagonal outline. The difference in shape is not sufficient evidence of their being specifically different, for there is usually much variation in the ossicles of a single crinoid stem and it is quite possible that they may have originally been found together. Bairstow suggests that they are both broadly identifiable as *Isocrinus* sp. (Pers. Comm. Dr. K. P. Oakley), letter 13th June 1966). The presence of crinoid ossicles in a Poison Cup considered to have been made of *Terra melitensis* is indeed, very interesting, but might perhaps raise some doubts about the Cup's origin, for although crinoids are represented in European Tertiary rocks, none have so far, ever been recorded from the Maltese Obliquo-Miocene rocks. In 1965, however, the present writer collected from the base of the *Scutella* bed overlying the Lower Coralline Limestone at Qammieh, Malta, a basal cup of a crinoid which was identified as belonging to the Genus *Comatulida*. Though specific identification is not possible (Pers. comm. Dr. R.P.S. Jefferies, BMNH, letter 24th June, 1966), it confirms the presence of such like fossils in the Maltese rocks. A large number of basal cups and stem ossicles of crinoids has since been collected by the present writer from the Upper Coralline Limestone of Bahrija, Malta and from the base of the Upper Globigerina Limestone division west of Xwejni, Gozo.

Another problem raised by the presence of crinoid ossicles embedded in the British Museum Poison Cup is the fact that there seems to be no evidence in

literature that these objects were ever attributed with any anti-poison properties. The Maltese crosses in relief on the outside of the Cup, the seal-impression figuring the image of St. Paul and the peripheral inscription *Pietra D.S. Paolo Contra Veleno*, leave no doubt whatever as to the Maltese origin of the Cup. The nature of the material from which the Cup is formed was verified and found to be as stated by Thompson (1932) "a whitish unbaked clay answering to the same tests as the *Terra sigillata* of Malta. Thompson's use of the word "clay" in this context may be misleading, as it may suggest the use of material other than limestone from the Grotto. The present writer has crushed some chippings from St. Paul's Crypt and following Lemery's direction for the preparation of *Terra sigillata* objects, prepared a bolus that is identical with the material of the trocisci, medals and cups.

The snakes and the embedded "serpents' eyes" seem to suggest the use for which the cup was intended. It is consequently quite probable that the two Maltese Tertiary crinoid ossicles were embedded in the Cup, not because they were supposed to have any intrinsic virtue against poison, but merely because they were products of the Maltese "*terra benedetta*", and as such they would be expected to possess the same powers as the "blessed" rock that contained them. Bairstow of the British Museum (National History) has jokingly suggested to Oakley that if vinegary wine were poured into such a cup, the palatal teeth of teleost fishes (consisting chiefly of calcium phosphate) would not be attacked, whilst the calcium carbonate stem ossicles would immediately start dissolving with emission of bubbles. The effervescence so produced would be enough to put the suspicious drinker on his guard and make him discard the beverage. All the same the Cup would have served its purpose just as admirably as if arsenic had been added to the drink. Arsenic was the most common and most dreaded poison used in medieval times and *Terra melitensis* (being unbaked calcium carbonate) would have reacted with it, neutralising its effect by chelation,

precipitating or coating it probably long enough to allow it to pass harmlessly through the digestive tract. These results were not understood as chemical reactions that were bound to occur with calcium carbonate whatever its origin, but were considered to be a special attribute of *Terra melitensis*, the privileged Maltese rock of the Grotto blessed by St. Paul, who had himself resisted the bite of a "poisonous" viper after his shipwreck on the Island.

**The Terra Sigillata Melitensis
Poison Cup
at the Museo Capellini, Bologna.**

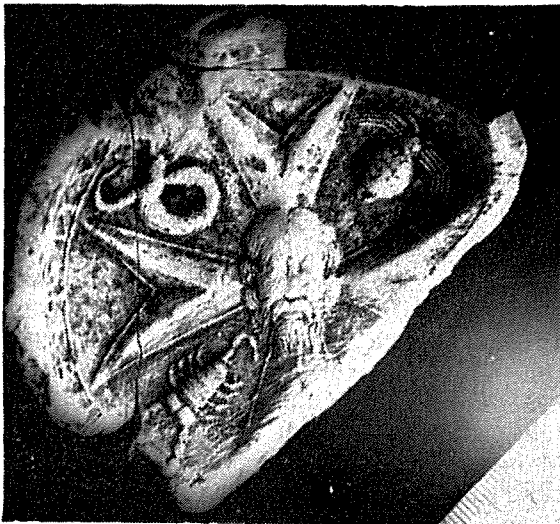
During a short stay in Bologna, Italy, in September 1967, the author of this paper had occasion to examine the "Gius. Monti

Collection 1733" housed in the Museo Capellini at the Institute of Geology and Palaeontology of the University of Bologna, and discovered among its fossils some objects of very unusual interest. These consisted of a broken Contra-Veleno Cup made of genuine *Terra sigillata melitensis*, a snake's head modelled in a white unbaked material similar to St. Paul's earth but lacking a seal, and a number of trocisci and medals of *Terra sigillata* of different origin. The significance and importance of the broken cup had been completely unnoticed by the Museum authorities, both present and past. No mention of the object is made in the undated old Manuscript Catalogue referred to in the *Ordinamento e Guida del Museo* (1918). Through the kindness of the Director, Professore Vialli, and of the Curator Dottoressa Rosanna Tampieri, permission

Contra-Veleno Cup made from Terra sigillata of Malta in the 'Gius. Monti 1733' Collection ('Museum Diluvianum in Scientiarum Instituti'), at the Museo Capellini, Bologna. By Courtesy. Professore Vialli, Director, Museo Capellini. Istituto di Geologia e Paleontologia, Università di Bologna.



3a. External view three Maltese crosses within a circle and foliage motif decoration in relief.



3b. Internal view showing another seal of an eight pointed cross of the Order with at the centre the Baptist's head and at the angles a poisonous animal, all within a circle. Peripheral inscription incomplete through wear and breakage.

was granted to the present author to examine these objects and to have them photographed for eventual publication.

External decoration: (Fig 3a).

The Bologna Cup, made of 4mm thick *Terra melitensis*, has an external diameter of 80mm and an overall height of 35mm. It is supported on a circular base 6mm high and 40mm in diameter, which unlike the British Museum *Contra-Veleno* Cup does not have any decoration in its depression. The external decoration is consequently limited to the sides of the Cup, and is in the form of three Maltese Crosses, within a ring, flanked on either side by a decorative design of foliage.

The decoration which is in relief, is symmetrically arranged and forms an attractive frieze all round the sides of the earless cup. A greenish-black deposit, whose real nature could not be ascertained, stains the decorations and some of the Cup's surface.

Internal decoration (Fig 3b).

On the inside surface of the Cup there is the impression of a seal which encroaches slightly on the sides, and which leaves no doubt as to the Cup's origin. Indeed, the theme is very similar to that on an undated 70mm bronze medal struck by the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem in Malta and reproduced by Calleja-Schembri (1966).

The impression shows the eight-pointed cross of the Order with the bearded, long-haired head of the Baptist at its centre. Each of the four angles of the Cross is occupied by the representation of a poisonous animal, whose anterior end is directed distally. In the left lower quadrant, there is a scorpion with wide open pincers and uplifted tail; the left upper quadrant is occupied by a viper curled up on itself in a figure of eight, whilst a spider with a large nodular thorax and abdomen is in the right upper quadrant. The right lower quadrant is completely missing, but it is almost certain that it bore the relief carving of a "salamander" or a lizard. The

connection of the "salamander" with Malta is not clear, notwithstanding that Kundmann (1737) records the figure of such an animal in one of the seals (No. 10 in his list) used to mark the authenticity of *Terra melitensis*. Kundmann described his seal thus:

"Num. 10. Ist viel grosser, nomlich bald 4 zoll in Diameter, die $7\frac{1}{2}$ Loth schwer, darauf befindet sich auch das haupt Johannis auf einschwerdt liegende, rund herum triechen die giftigen Thiere, wider weichen Bis und Stich die Erde gebraucht wird, als eine Viper, Molch, Scorpion, Schlange und Spinne."

Another variant of the same seal seems to be that described by KUNDMANN (1726, p. 297, item no.17): "*Terra sigillata Melitensis cum Capite Johannis Baptistae & gladio, item animalibus noxiis, quorum venenis, uti volunt, terra medetur; qualia sunt: vipera, lacerta, aranea, scorpio, serpens.*"

The authenticating seal bore a peripheral legend which is reproduced on the impression as a mirror image inscription. Of this however, only five letters survive, ".....VN* PER.....", in the upper left side of the cross, in the quadrant of the viper moving on to that of the scorpion. The rest of the legend is either completely worn away with use or missing through breakage. The mirror image relief (so common in early lithograph maps of Malta) is here noticeable only in the inscription, but actually affects also the originally planned sequence of the poisonous animals. It results from lack of foresight on the part of the engraver of the seal or dice who ignores the fact that the seal has to be inverted when stamping.

The material composing the cup is a very white, porous, unbaked material, not unlike that from which the previously mentioned "Serpent's head" (found in the same collection) was formed.

The two *Contra-Veleno* Cups compared:

A comparison of these two *Contra-Veleno* Cups reveals that they have roughly the same shape and dimensions, and that the Maltese Cross (the eight-pointed cross

of the Order) figures prominently on the outside of both drinking vessels. In addition they both lack an ear and both stand on a circular rimmed base, resembling (in miniature) the drinking vessel locally known as *Skutella*, which is still much in use by Maltese farmers and village people for coffee or soups. Each cup bears the hallmark of genuine *Terra melitensis* on its inside base, but the impressions used for the purpose on the two cups are different. It should be noted also that the British Museum Poison-Cup has a number of Maltese fossils embedded in its hallmark, which carries also a straight-forward peripheral inscription, whilst the Bologna Museum Poison Cup has no such fossils embedded in its authenticating impression, and its inscription is in mirror image.

It should be noted also that their respective hallmarks incorporating representations of such highly noxious animals as the scorpion, viper and the spider in the Bologna specimen and the peripheral legend in the British Museum vessel openly declaring that it was made from the "*Pietra di S. Paolo Contra Veleno*" reveal the use for which the cups were originally intended: as a safeguard against a poisoned drink.

The function of the British Museum Poison Cup is revealed also in the relief decoration of its sides with snakes and vipers. Indeed, the external surface decoration seems to be the most striking difference between the two Cups. With its circular, outside base decorated with several unidentified figures and with its sides containing a large number of vipers and snakes in relief, the British Museum Poison Cup is more symbolic than the Bologna Museum Poison Cup, whose circular outside base shows no figures at all, and whose sides are very artistically decorated with symmetrical patterns of foliage and Maltese crosses in relief.

Nothing is known of what other *Contra-Veleno* Cups made of *Terra Sigiillata Melitensis* looked like, for the ones described are the only two poison cups known to have survived the ravages of time. There may however, be many more specimens lurking unidentified in private

collections or in Museum store rooms. With the intellectual enlightenment of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the *Contra-Veleno* Cups fell gradually into disuse. In time, their great importance to Medieval society was totally forgotten, so that today, very few people have even heard of their existence.

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